

Sermon 9: Judges 10-11:11: The Appointment of Jephthah

OUTLINE

Returning to sin
Returning to God
Returning to bad leaders

INTRODUCTION

The book of Judges is the story of man's ever deepening sinking into sin. Judges uses the various generations and rulers appointed to show what life without God looks like, it is a degrading picture of compounding wickedness. The book of judges started off with promise, there were judges who were godly men who led according to God's principles and who brought about peace throughout the land. With each generation we have watched the repetitive cycle of sin, punishment, repentance and God raising up a deliverer repeat in a weakening way. This brings us to Jephthah. His rule is at a high point of the Canaanization of Israel. What is interesting about Jephthah is that his rule is bracketed by a number of briefly mentioned judges, we have Tola and Jair in v1-5; and Ibzan, Elon and Abdon in 12:8-15. Firstly, we need to note the way in which these judges are introduced. In the earlier judges we have explicit references to God raising up deliverers, 3:9, 3:15. But as things progress we see these sorts of references dropping off. In 10:1 you will notice that Tola arose to save Israel, no mention of God raising him up; likewise with Jair. That pattern continues with the judges mentioned in 12:8-15. Secondly, we have recently dug into the ambitious and murderous 'kingship' of Abimelech, a man appointed to rule in all sorts of wrong ways. Well our narrator has chosen to give us the detail not of Tola or Jair but of Jephthah's rise to power and rule. A question does occur to us as we see this choice, why Jephthah? It has been suggested that the book of judges was written by Samuel as an apologetic and preparation for the kingship of David, the book ends with the words, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' How you choose your king is a very important matter, the choosing of Saul may be in the background informing which judges get attention. Gideon was approached by the people for wrong reasons to king; Abimelech manipulated and murdered his way to be king; and here we have Jephthah who is likewise a man of questionable character who is wrongly put in power. The book teaches the people of God to want a king for the right reasons and to want the right sort of king; and any king who would come to power has plenty of object lessons in what not to do. As we look at the rise of Jephthah we will not be seeing any new ideas, but repeats of familiar themes in the book of judges. Repeats that intensify the situation. We will note their return to sin and its increase; their attempt to return to God with poor repentance; and their repeat failure in appointing the wrong man to leadership.

Returning to sin

V6, 'The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.' This list is the longest of all the lists of Israel's idolatry in judges. We see a list of 7 deities that Israel were serving. Not only are these gods the gods of the Canaanites that dwell in the land, that is not enough, they have gotten new gods from the surrounding

nations as well. The list ends with a mention of the Ammonites and the Philistines, these will be the enemy groups that Jephthah and Samson will encounter. To have an idol instead of God is an abomination, what do we call and abomination that is multiplied sevenfold? We learn here of the snowball effect of sin. We can't manage sin and think I will just sin a little; like Pringles, once you pop you can't stop. We see the insatiableness of sin. These warnings are on display to discourage us from sin. What we have here is evidence of God handing the Israelites over to their sins as a judgement. We see the terrifying reality of sin being God's judgement upon sin which gives birth to sin which further traps us in sin.

We see the forsaking of God for idols. We may grow weary of hearing this and not react to it, but this is a deep evil. Jeremiah 2:11-13 helps us plumb the wickedness here. 'Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.' Israel in her sin has done the unthinkable she has exchanged truth for lies, treasure for worthlessness, and God for empty and dead idols. But this is what we do when we are living for sin and not for God. There is a call here to be shocked by the absolute insanity and self-destruction; from the complete wrongness and sinfulness of doing this. God spells it out in two evils. Firstly, they have forsaken God, the fountain of living water; and secondly, they have made their own gods that can hold no water. God uses the symbol of water, something life giving to those living in semi-arid conditions. On the one hand is God a neverending fountain of life giving water who quenches thirst, and sustains life. And next to this is a self-made cistern that is supposed to catch rain water but has cracks in it and it can hold no water resulting only in thirst and death. We must not miss the double evil described. We all know viscerally the emptiness of sin, the emptiness of trying to find something to satisfy our hearts, to build a future on, to root our identities in. This part will make sense to us, we know what it means to be thirsty. But we overlook the evil of forsaking God. This is the greater part of their sin and ours, and yet the part that we underestimate. There is no greater sin than this one. Social injustices, self-harm, these are nothing in comparison to our sin against God. The word 'forsaken' brings us back to the marriage metaphor. God as a husband rescues us from slavery, provides for us, sustains us, loves us, makes us heirs in all that is His. And we leave Him for other lovers. But God is greater than the metaphor for His is more than simply a husband. He is God, He is Creator, He is the literal Lord of all to whom all things owe their existence and praise. We are not just stupid and self-destructive, we are wicked.

The insanity is intensified in the case of Israel because they take the gods of the enemies, the ones who have afflicted them, more than that they go outside the borders of Israel to get gods. Their enemies have conquered and oppressed them, instead of rejecting these gods for the God who delivered them from Egypt, they adopt the gods of their oppressors. Our capacity for self-afflicting idiocy is infinite. So God responds, v7-9, 'So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, ⁸ and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. ⁹ And the Ammonites

crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.'

Returning to God

Things become desperate for Israel and they cry out to the Lord, but their cry of repentance is not true repentance. Sinners when they are distressed resort to emergency religion. Emergency religion can take many forms, false repentance has many faces. Israel offer confession without change, and the Lord rejects them. V10-14, 'And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." ¹¹And the Lord said to the people of Israel, "Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? ¹²The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. ¹³Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. ¹⁴Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."

God is not satisfied with external religion, a mere saying of words without heart, or words without actions. Ceremonial communal repentance that is not accompanied with a real putting away of sin and the idols they once served is rejected. These actions reveal our own pathetic repentance where we want the benefit of having God's hand lifted off of us, but we are not willing to put away our sins. When we feel pain we repent in order to stop the difficulty not because we are sorry over our sins and that we have offended God. One commentator speaks about real repentance being 'a sorrow for sin, rather than just its consequences; a sorrow over idolatrous motives, not just behavioural change.' God seeks to move them to a proper repentance by reminding them that He is worthy of their worship, He saved them, and multiple times. They cried out for help and He responded, multiple times. God is patient; He is gracious, but there is also a point at which God says, I cannot allow you to offer a false repentance, for me to be kind when you refuse to stop sinning is bad all around. So God points us to our idols and He tells us to pray to them. You chose that god now live with it, serve under their powerful hand; walk in their wise ways; let them protect you from your enemies; let them provide good things; go and see how willing they are to answer prayer. Our idols are false they cannot be our God. They cannot save, they cannot deliver.

Consider David's example of true repentance in Ps. 51. V3, 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.' Feel David's knowledge of his sin. He knows his transgressions. This however is more than an intellectual knowledge, he tells us that they are ever before him. David may be recalling the guilt of that year of not owning up to his sin. This may be a revealing of how it never left his mind and haunted him and drained the life from him. We are at a great disadvantage in our age. When our sin comes to haunt us all we have to do is distract ourselves. Is your life an endless stream of amusements or work, or do you have space to feel the weight of your sins?

V4, 'Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your judgement.' When we see our sin for what it is, we see it as against God, we see it as God sees it, and we see that there is no one to blame but ourselves. Many today might be offended at the idea that David claims that he has sinned only against God and not Bathsheba, and Uriah, and Joab, and any other affected by his actions. The very fact that people are

offended reveals that we do not share David's deeper perspective on what sin is. Since God alone is God, and His law alone is rule over us and defines sin, in the strictest sense we cannot sin against another person, we can only wrong them.

The objectifying perspective is found in his words, 'and done what is evil in your sight.' Try and imagine all the excuses David would have made at the time of his sin. Other kings do what they want; I have worked hard and am allowed to indulge myself; I am the King. Many of these excuses would be based on what others do or think. Other cultures might think it is ok and minimize the act. How do we cut through these excuses and cover ups? We view it as God does, it is evil in His sight. He names it a sin, evil, wicked, iniquity, unrighteous and we no longer argue but submit to what He says. We call it what He calls it. True repentance stops looking for excuses and starts looking at it as God does. God alone is infinite and deserves all of our obedience, worship, love, sacrifice, etc., but instead of giving it to God we give it to something less worthy, something finite. All sin amounts to insulting God as we choose to serve another in His stead. Unlike Adam and Eve we do not point the finger at others, but rather at ourselves.

David's sight of his sin leads to a sight of his sinfulness, v5-6, 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.' When we reflect on our evil, we go beyond the idea of the fact that we do bad things, to realizing that we are bad. Our sin is deeper than our actions, it goes all the way into our hearts and natures. We see our hearts as a constant source of evil, that all of our lives have been sinful from the first. V5 and 6 are a contrast between the sin we are and the holy requirements of God. God calls for purity of heart but I am a sinner from conception and sinful through and through. This contrast however is not hopeless, for God gives where He commands, 'and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.'

V15-16, 'And the people of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day." ¹⁶ So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.' How does this repentance measure up? It is imperfect. They like David recognize that God has the right to judge these are the right words; yet there is still a demanding desire for deliverance which seems to cut against their repentance. They do put away their idols, but the last part of v16 can be translated, and He became impatient with the efforts of Israel. The word for misery can also be the word for effort. If this is so then we see that God delivers Israel not because of their repentance but because of His commitment to His promises towards this nation, preserving them for the sake of Christ coming from them. I think there is a lesson here. God rejects false repentance. Twice it appears that they do not repent as they ought. Those who trust in Christ falsely just so that their lives will go better are like this repentance. I have prayed with many a drug addict who is trying Jesus on to see if a little religion will fix their problems, God rejects such repentance this is not the repentance that God accepts. But let us add that there is no one who repents perfectly, this is not an excuse to aim low but a reality that we need to admit. It is true but weak, often like our faith. We have to ask Lord help my unbelief, help my lack of full repentance. If we are those who imperfectly yet truly come to God in repentance He accepts us, He does not despise us. Some might be so burdened by the thought that their repentance might be false that they despair. Those who have too great a view of their sins and too small a view of God need to lean

on the promise, Ps. 51:17, 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.'

Returning to bad leaders

The Ammonites gather for war and Israel gather too. They feel their need for a leader, v17-18, 'Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. ¹⁸ And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, "Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." Now if you were seeking a leader how would you go about it? You would remember that you are God's people; you would cry out to God; you would seek out someone who seeks God's glory; who is knowledgeable of God's ways; you might even go to a priest and consult the Urim and the Thummim. At this point we are introduced to Jephthah, 11:1-3, 'Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ² And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." ³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.' . Jephthah is a man similar to Gideon and Abimelech. G and J were both nobodies, they both became tyrants; both have victories, brutalise their own people and confront Ephraim. A and J have similarities too, both are born to secondary women, both surround themselves with riff raff; both negotiate for leadership, and both kill members of their own family and country. In verses 1-3 we are introduced to Jephthah. First mentioned is not his godliness or wisdom but his ability with the sword. He is the son of a prostitute. This reveals Israel's condition in a few possible ways. If she was an Israelite prostitute then the law of Moses was being broken. If she was a Canaanite prostitute then the law was being broken, and if she was a fertility prostitute associated with idolatry the law was being broken. He was then illegally forced out of the family by the greedy motives of his brothers. He was obviously a natural leader who gathered men to himself, he was a type of god-father figure, a head of organised crime. Compare this list of credentials against the qualifications of elders and you can see how sinful Israel is being by selecting Jephthah for leadership. They are not prioritising godliness but swordsmanship, fleshly strength is preferred before spiritual strength. If Israel were making the choice between calling a pastor who was famous or one who was faithful, between reading a book that had a nice front cover or was faithful to the bible we know which they would choose. They wanted results no matter the way to them and they chose a violent criminal for a leader. This sinful choosing points up how we choose all sorts of things instead of the Savior we need in Christ.

V4-11, 'After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites." ⁷ But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" ⁸ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." ⁹ Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head."

¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.' We see that they came to Jephthah with less than what was originally offered in 10:18, that the man who would lead them would be a president to rule over all of them. They merely offered him to be the commander in chief 11:6. Jephthah draws attention to their original rejection of him. They make a counter offer of what was originally offered total leadership 11:8. Jephthah then gets them to agree to his conditions of being reinstated in his family, and brought home publicly 11:9. He insures that these things will be his even if he is not able to defeat the Ammonites. Verse 9 also makes reference to the LORD giving the Ammonites over to him. This reference might be the seed of faith commended in Hebrews 11:32. But we must not miss the very mixed religion that he is practicing. He is much like those Hollywood godfathers who are killers but religious, he is no paragon of virtue but a sample of the people he is going to deliver. One commentator has a helpful perspective claiming that the author of judges is showing the progress of the Canaanization of Israel, Jephthah is a perfect synthesis of Canaanite religion which separates religion from holiness. We see this section then ending with the token religious services but the ironic fact of a criminal taking these oaths before God must not be overlooked. The brokenness of man in sin is apparent in this section and moreso in the hypocritical manner in which we separate religion from holiness.